DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 361 UD 031 339

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TITLE	Stressful Life Events, Psychological Well-Being, and Parenting in African American Mothers.
INSTITUTION	National Research Center on Education in the Inner Cities, Philadelphia, PA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	[96]
NOTE	27p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Black Mothers; Child Rearing; Discipline; *Family Characteristics; Family Relationship; *Life Events; *Parenting Skills; *Psychological Patterns; Self Esteem; Stress Management; *Stress Variables; Work Experience
IDENTIFIERS	*African Americans

ABSTRACT

The association of stressful life events with mothers' psychological distress and parenting was examined in 79 African American mothers living in 1- and 2-parent households. Findings reveal that stress in the areas of family disruption and work problems was associated with lower maternal acceptance. Family disruption was also positively associated with mothers' firm control of behavior. Family disruption and work related stress were also negatively associated with mothers' self-esteem. Health related stress was positively related to mothers' psychological distress. Mothers' self-esteem was positively associated with mothers' acceptance and negatively related to firm control. Results also reveal that mothers' self-esteem mediates the association of family disruption and work related stress on mothers' acceptance. When the effects of mothers' self-esteem were controlled, significant relationships between family disruption, work related stress, and mothers' acceptance were no longer apparent. (Contains 1 table, 5 figures, and 27 references.) (Author/SLD)

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ED 400 361

Stressful Life Events, Psychological Well-Being, and Parenting in African American Mothers

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The research reported herein is supported in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education through a grant to the National Center on Education in the Inner Cities (CEIC) at the Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education (CRHDE). The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the supporting agencies, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

UD031339

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Abstract

The association of stressful life events with mothers' psychological distress and parenting was examined in 79 African-American mothers living in one and two-parent households. Findings revealed that stress in the areas of family disruption and work problems were associated with lower maternal acceptance. Family disruption was also positively associated with mothers' firm control of behavior. Family disruption and work related stress were also negatively associated with mothers' self-esteem. Health related stress was positively related to mothers' psychological distress. Mothers' self-esteem was positively associated with mothers' acceptance and negatively related to firm control. Results also revealed that mothers' self-esteem mediated the association of family disruption and work related stress on mothers' acceptance. When the effects of mothers' self-esteem were controlled, significant relations between family disruption, work related stress, and mothers' acceptance were no longer apparent.

Stressful life events, psychological well-being,
and parenting among African-American mothers

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Conceptual models and research findings have suggested that stressful events experienced by parents affect adolescents through their impact on parents' psychological well-being, and in turn, through the impact of parents' well-being on parents' parenting practices (Conger et al., 1992; Ge et al., 1994; Conger et al., 1995; Patterson, 1983). For example, Ge et al., (1994) in a study of rural, European-American families found that stressful events are positively associated with parents' depressed mood which, in turn, is positively associated with harsh/inconsistent parenting. Harsh/inconsistent parenting is positively linked to adolescent depressive symptoms. Also, Elder's work examining families who experienced economic hardship during the Depression of the 1930's revealed that father's who experienced severe economic strain were irritable, tense, and emotionally volatile. The father's emotional distress in turn, was associated with increased punitiveness and inconsistency in their discipline practices. Fathers' parenting behaviors were associated with negative outcomes for both younger children (temper tantrums, irritability) and adolescents (moodiness, lowered aspiration, hypersensitivity; Elder, Lider, & Cross, 1984; Elder, Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985). The generalizability of the conceptual model and empirical findings to African-American families is not clearly established. The empirical studies testing the conceptual model have focused upon European-American families. Whether similar relations are present among African-American families remains an important question. In the present study we examined the possible links between stressful events, mothers' psychological well-being, and parenting behaviors, in African-

American mothers.

Research on the impact of stressful life events is especially needed with African-American families for several reasons. First, in 1993, 31% of African-American families and 46% of African-American children were poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). In comparison, in the same period, 17% of European-American children and 9% of European-American families were poor. Also, the unemployment rate for African-American workers is typically more than twice that of European-Americans (McLoyd, 1990; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Given the high rates of economic disadvantage and employment problems among African-American families, exposure to stressful life events may be more likely. Indeed, research has shown that individuals with fewer economic resources are more likely to experience negative life events (Dohrewend, 1970).

Second, evidence suggests that African-Americans may be more vulnerable to the stressful effects of negative life events than European-Americans. For example, African-American males compared to European-American males experience greater stress for longer periods following the loss of a job (Buss & Redburn, 1983). McLoyd (1990) suggests that African-Americans may be more stressed by their disadvantage because of their perceptions of the racial barriers they must face in rectifying their situation. In the sections that follow we review evidence justifying the application of the model examined to the functioning of African-American mothers.

Stressful life events and parenting

Numerous studies have shown a link between stress and

diminished parenting (Daniel, Hampton, Newberger, 1983; Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984; McLoyd, 1990; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). For example, Weinraub and Wolf (1983) found that mothers who experience more negative life events are less nurturant toward their children. Also, Gersten and associates (Gersten, Langer, Eisenberg, & Simcha-Fagan, 1977) have shown that stressful life events are positively associated with restrictive and punitive parenting. Additionally, Daniel et al. (1983) have found that compared to nonabusive African-American mothers, abusive African-American mothers had experienced recent stressful life events.

Stressful life events and psychological well-being

Evidence also suggests that there is a link between stressful life events and individuals' psychological well-being. Research on economic stressors has shown that for African-American men and women, the loss of a job is associated with sadness and depression (Brown & Gary, 1988; Gary, 1985; Thompson & Ensminger, 1989). It has also been shown that economic disadvantage is associated with a variety of forms of psychological distress and mental disorder (Liem, 1978; McAdoo, 1986; Neff & Husani, 1980). McLoyd (1990) suggests that among the factors responsible for the mental health problems of the poor is "an overrepresentation in lower class life of a broad-range of frustration producing life-events", some of which are discrete, while others are chronic.

In research on the effects of stressful life events for European-American families, Conger et al. (1993) have shown that illness is associated with depression for both mothers and fathers. Illness is associated with somatization as well for mothers. For

fathers, legal problems are moderately associated with depression and significantly linked to both anxiety and hostility. Finally, negative events in the extended family are associated with depression, anxiety, and hostility in both mothers and fathers. Similar research with African-American families has not been conducted.

Psychological well-being and parenting

There is also support in the literature for the link between parents' psychological well-being and less adequate parenting. For example, McLoyd et al., (1994) found that for single African-American mothers depressive symptomatology is positively associated with the use of aversive punishments (scolding, yelling, hitting). Mothers' depressive symptoms are also linked to mothers' negative perceptions of the maternal role. Research with both African-American and European-American families has also shown that mothers' emotional distress is negatively associated with positive parenting behavior (hugs, kisses, praise) and positively linked to aversive parenting (derogatory statements, threats, slaps; Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984).

Theoretical model

Figure 1 provides the theoretical model guiding this investigation. Based on this model, stressful events are expected to be linked to less adequate parenting including lower acceptance and lower active regulation of behavior. We also predict that stressful events are negatively associated with mothers' psychological well-being, including higher psychological distress and lower self-esteem. We predict that mothers' psychological

distress and self-esteem are associated with mothers' parenting. Finally, we expect that the effects of stressful events on mothers' parenting are mediated by the association of stressful events with mothers' psychological distress and self-esteem. Stressful events were expected to have a negative impact on mothers' psychological well-being, and in turn, negative changes in mothers' psychological well-being were expected to have a negative impact on parenting.

Method

Participants

Participants were 79 African-American mothers. Forty-four of the mothers were single parents, and 35 were living in two-parent households. Mothers in one-parent households were on average 37.63 years, while mothers in two-parents homes averaged 41.34 years. Mothers in one-parent households had on average 2.41 children, while mothers in two-parents homes had 3.42 children. Mothers in one-parents homes had completed an average of 12.84 years of school, while mothers in two-parent homes averaged 13.25 years of schooling. Mothers in one-parent homes had incomes which on average ranged from $10,000 to $15,000. The incomes of mothers in two-parent homes ranged from $20,000 to $25,000. Only 7 fathers completed questionnaires and therefore their data was not included in the analyses. The recruitment of families for participation in the investigation involved solicitation at recreation centers, local markets, social services agencies, and through newspaper advertisements. All families were paid for their participation.

Measures

(a) Stressful life events were measured with Psychiatric

Epidemiology Research Interview (PERI) Life Events Scale (Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenag, & Dohrenwend, 1978). In the questionnaire mothers were asked to indicate whether any of 35 different events happened to them in the past year. A factor analysis of the measure was used to identify items forming scales in four areas, family disruption, work related stress, health problems, relationship problems.

Events in the area of family disruption (14 items) concerned areas of difficulty or problems in the nuclear family, such as a death in the family, family arguments, family moving to a new residence. Events in the area of work related stress (6 items) concerned stress associated with work such as trouble on the job, or beginning a new job. Events in the area of health problems (6 items) concerned the experience of illnesses or other health problems or physical conditions such as an injury, an accident, or an improperly treated physical illness. Events in the area of relationship problems (9 items) concerned negative changes or difficulties with a spouse or "significant other" (for mothers in one-parent homes) such as a break up or separation. The total score for each of the event types is the sum total of the affirmative responses (1= yes, no = 0) for events in the cluster.

(b) Psychological well-being. Mothers' psychological well-being was assessed in the areas of psychological distress and self-esteem. Psychological distress (20 items) was assessed using the Center for Epidemiological Studies (CES) Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). For this measure the mothers reported the frequency of mental or physical states such as feelings of depression or loss of

appetite, etc., over the past month. The Likert-response scale for the measure ranged from "4 = three or more times" to "1 = never". Self-esteem (10 items) was assessed with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale, which has been widely used with adults, assesses the self-acceptance component of self-esteem (sample question: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities"). The response format for the measure is a Likert-response scale ranging from 4 (Strongly Agree) to 1 (Strongly Disagree).

(c) Parenting behavior (30 items) was assessed using the revised short form of the Child's Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (CRPBI, Schludermann & Schludermann, 1977). This measure assesses three aspects of maternal disciplinary practices: Acceptance, Lax Control (vs. Firm Control), and Psychological Control (vs. Psychological Autonomy). The CRPBI is a widely used Likert-scale format, self-report measure of adolescents' assessment of the parent's discipline practices. A version of the scale also measures parents' report of their disciplinary practices. The mothers used the version for parents to report on their parenting practices. The Psychological Control subscale was not included in the analyses because past research (Taylor, Casten, & Flickinger, 1993) has shown that the measure has little relationship to adolescent adjustment for African-American adolescents.

The Acceptance subscale (10 items) assessed the mother's perceptions of maternal closeness and acceptance of the adolescent. The Lax Control subscale (10 items) consisted of questions on mothers' supervision and regulation of the adolescent's behavior.

The measure of Lax control was coded so that high scores represent the extent to which mothers exerted firm control over the adolescents' behavior.

Analysis Plan

Recursive path analysis estimated by ordinary least squares regression was used to test the conceptual model shown in Figure 1. For each of the variables path coefficients were estimated using a series of multiple regression equations. Across all analyses shown in Figures 2 - 5, the criterion variables were regressed on all variables with arrows leading to the criterion variable. This procedure was followed for each of the separate criterion variables. The demographic factors of age, income, and family structure were included in analyses to examine and control for their effects.

Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendations for assessing mediator effects were used in the analyses. According to Baron and Kenny mediational effects are apparent when there is evidence that (a) the predictor variable (e.g., stressful life event) is significantly associated with the criterion variable (e.g., acceptance and firm control); (b) the predictor variable and proposed mediator (e.g., mothers' psychological distress and self-esteem) are significantly related; (c) the mediator and criterion variable are significantly associated; and (d) controlling for the effects of the mediator variable reduces the association of the predictor and criterion variables, while the association of the mediator and criterion variables remain.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the major variables are presented in Table 1. Descriptive analyses revealed that in general, stressful events were moderately correlated suggesting that while they measured somewhat overlapping areas, they mainly assessed independent domains. The parenting measures were unrelated indicating that they measured independent areas. There were few effects of the demographic measures. There was a significant positive association between mothers' education and family income.

Stressful events and mothers' parenting behavior

The first step in assessing the mediation of the association of stressful events with mothers' parenting was to examine the relationship between the measures of stressful events and the indices of mothers' parenting. The results shown in Figure 2 reveal that family disruption was negatively associated with mothers' acceptance, beta = -.44, $p < .05$). Disruption was also positively associated with mothers' firm control of behavior, beta = .55, $p < .01$. Also, work related stress was negatively associated with acceptance, beta = .43, $p < .05$.

Stressful events and mothers' psychological well-being

The second step in assessing the mediation of the association of stressful events with mothers' parenting was to examine the association of stressful events with mothers' psychological well-being. These findings are shown in Figure 3 and reveal that family disruption was negatively associated with mothers' self-esteem, beta = -.43, $p < .05$. Work related stress was also negatively associated with mothers' self-esteem, beta = -.36, $p < .03$.

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Mothers' health problems were positively associated with psychological distress, beta = .54, $p < .001$.

Mothers' psychological well-being and parenting

The third step in assessing the mediation of the relationship of stressful events with mothers' parenting was to assess the link between mothers' psychological well-being and their parenting. These results are shown in Figure 4 and indicate that mothers' self-esteem was positively associated with mothers' acceptance, beta = .46, $p < .001$. Also, mothers' self-esteem was negatively associated with mothers' firm control, beta = -.25, $p < .05$.

Mediational effects

The final step in assessing the mediation of the association of stressful events with mothers' parenting was to examine the link between stressful events and parenting, when controlling for the effects of mothers' psychological well-being. Evidence in support of mediation also requires that mothers' psychological well-being remain significantly associated with mothers' parenting when stressful life events are controlled. Evidence of mediation emerged for one of the measures of mothers' parenting. Specifically, the association of family disruption with mothers' acceptance (beta = -.43) was no longer apparent when the effects of mothers' self-esteem were controlled (beta = -.17). These findings are shown in Figure 5. It is important to note that only significant paths are displayed. Psychological distress cannot be a mediator of the association because psychological distress was unrelated to mothers' parenting.

Also, the significant negative relation of work related stress

with mothers' acceptance (beta = -.43) was no longer apparent when the effects of self-esteem were controlled (beta = -.16). With the measures of stressful events controlled self-esteem remained significantly associated with mothers' acceptance (beta = .41, $p < .001$. Also, no evidence of mediation was found in the relation of family disruption with mothers' firm control. The significant association of family disruption with mothers' firm control (beta = .55) was still apparent with the effect of self-esteem controlled (beta = .50).

Summary

Findings indicated that stress in the areas of family disruption and work related problems were associated with lower maternal acceptance. Family disruption was also positively associated with mothers' firm control of behavior. Family disruption and work related stress were also negatively associated with mothers' self-esteem. In addition, stress in the area of health problems was positively related to mothers' psychological distress. Mothers' self-esteem was positively associated with mothers' acceptance and negatively associated with firm control. Finally, the effects of family disruption and work related stress on mothers' acceptance were mediated by mothers' self-esteem.

Discussion

Prior research suggests that stressful events have an adverse impact on parenting through the influence on parents' well-being. In the present study we extend this earlier work by examining the relationships found in a sample of urban, African-American mothers. Similar to earlier research, our results revealed that stressors in

the areas of family disruption and work problems are negatively associated with mothers' acceptance. These findings are consistent with the growing body of research revealing the association between stressful experiences and parenting in African-American families (Daniel et al. 1983; McLoyd, in press). Also, family disruption is positively associated with mothers' firm control and regulation of behavior. This finding was unexpected in that it was predicted that mothers' stress would have an adverse impact on their control and regulation of behavior. Family disruption involves among other things, a change in residence or a change in the composition of the family. It may be that mothers perceived an increased need to regulate their adolescent's behavior in the context of family instability.

Also, the results revealed that family disruption and work related stress are associated with a decrease in mothers' self-esteem. Mothers' health related problems are associated with increased psychological distress. A number of interesting comparisons between African-American mothers of the present sample and rural, European-American parents in some past research are notable. For example, Conger et al. (1993) found no effect of job related stressors on the psychological well-being of rural, European-American mothers or fathers, while in the present study, job related stress was negatively related to self-esteem for African-American mothers. It may be that work related stressors are more common for urban, African-American mothers. For instance, such mothers may have to cope with job related racial tensions to a degree that rural, European-American parents do not. Or it may

be that the nature of jobs and related tensions differ in rural versus urban areas. Across both African-American and European-American mothers, health related stressors are associated psychological distress.

Findings also revealed that mothers' self-esteem is positively related to their acceptance of their children and negatively associated with their firm control of behavior. These findings are consistent with past research showing that negative changes in mothers' psychological well-being are associated with less adequate parenting (Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984; McLoyd et al. 1994).

Finally, the findings also provide evidence of the mediational effect of mothers' psychological well-being in the association of stressful events with mothers' parenting. Increased stress in the areas of family disruption and work problems are negatively associated with mothers' self-esteem, which in turn, is positively associated with mothers' acceptance. These findings suggest that as mothers' stress increases their self-esteem decreases, and lower self-esteem is associated with lower maternal acceptance. These findings are consistent with past research (Conger et al. 1995; McLoyd et al. 1994) and with the theoretical model developed by Conger and associates, and Patterson (e.g., Conger et al. 1992; Ge et al. 1994; Conger et al. 1995; Patterson, 1983) to explain the link between stressful experiences and adjustment within families.

There are a number of limitations which should be considered in the interpretation of these findings. First, because of the small size of the sample, the regression coefficients may be less

precise than they would be had the sample been larger. The small sample size does not invalidate the coefficients but indeed, makes the detection of significant effects more difficult.

Second, also concerning the sample, though there were no readily apparent features of the sample which would distinguish them from other African-American families, the participants were not a random sample and caution should be taken in generalizing these findings to other African-American families.

Third, the report relies upon the self-report of mothers. It is possible that because the mothers were the only source of data, significant relations found are the result of shared method variance involved in the measures. Specifically, significant associations found may be due to the fact that the measures were comprised of questionnaires completed by the mothers as the single respondents. The findings would be more firmly established with additional informants and additional methods of data collection.

Finally, the relationships found are correlational in nature and as such tell us little about causation. It is possible for example, that mothers' low self-esteem increases the likelihood that they will experience stressful life events, rather than the reverse. Longitudinal data would be helpful in assessing the causal direction of the relations.

Findings confirm the prediction that stressful events are associated with a diminished quality of parenting because stressors have an impact on parents psychological well-being. These findings are important because they may foretell of potential problem areas. Access to employment, the changing nature of employment, and access

to health care currently are hotly debated social issues. These findings suggest that negative changes in the nature of and access to employment, for instance, the movement of jobs away from central cities, or negative changes in access to medical care, may have important implications for family life in African-American homes. An important next step will be to assess the impact of negative events experienced by parents on adolescents. Work by McLoyd et al. (1994) has indicated the impact of some economic stressors on parenting and adolescent adjustment. However, research needs to be conducted on the association of stressors such as work stress or family disruption, stressors which may be linked to families' economic well-being, and their association with adolescent adjustment.

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Figure 1. Conceptual model of the linkages of stressful life events with mothers' parenting.

Figure 2. Association of stressful life events with mothers' acceptance and firm control. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed on each path with corresponding p values in parentheses. Only significant paths are shown.

Figure 3. Association of stressful life events with mothers' self-esteem and psychological distress. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed on each path with corresponding p values in parentheses. Only significant paths are shown.

Figure 4. Association of mothers' self-esteem and psychological distress with acceptance and firm control. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed on each path with corresponding p values in parentheses. Only significant paths are shown.

Figure 5. Mediational role of mothers' self-esteem and psychological distress in the linkage of stressful life events with mothers' acceptance and firm control. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed on each path with corresponding p values in parentheses. Only significant paths are shown.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Selected Variables
(N= 79)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Mother:														
1. Relationship Problems	6.72	4.89	...											
2. Family Disruption	7.20	2.20	.42**	...										
3. Health Problems	4.53	3.60	.36*	.35*	...									
4. Work Stress	5.25	4.19	.53**	.74**	.55*	...								
5. Acceptance	26.36	2.61	.09	-.48**	.11	-.35*	...							
6. Firm Control	14.17	2.22	.16	.12	-.35*	.00	.03	...						
7. Psychological Distress	29.02	7.95	.16	.34*	.31*	-.34*	.17	.03	...					
3. Self-esteem	33.44	4.69	.05	-.49**	.08	-.39*	.46*	-.28*	-.26*	...				
Demographic:														
9. Mothers' Age	38.65	7.09	.05	.14	-.19	.21	.05	-.25	.05	.06	...			
10. Mothers' Education	11.80	1.38	.04	.15	.16	-.14	-.07	.06	.04	.02	-.18	...		
Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

11. Family Structure	...	...	.24	.01	.08	.02	.02	-.04	.24	.03	.03	-.15	...
12. Family income	2.50	1.79	.09	.08	.01	.09	-.11	-.15	-.15	-.28	-.02	.40**	.03	...

* p< .05
** p< .01

Figure Captions